

## REFRAMING MOTHERS

### IN FAMILY LITERACY

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#### Abstract

Despite the centrality of mothers in their children's education, mothers have, until relatively recently, been largely invisible in the research literature theorising and describing family and intergenerational literacy practices and programs, or have been viewed as somehow deficient in their literacy practices. This paper develops a feminist analysis of family literacy programs and, drawing on critical literacy, outlines pedagogical practices that reposition mothers as researchers of language and ethnographers of literacy practices within their families. Using a selection of data from a researched case study, the paper makes visible the mother's labour in the development of child literacy and argues that a more complex set of understandings is required to inform pedagogical approaches to family literacy. I reconceptualise family literacy programs within a post structuralist feminist framework, and suggest pedagogies which acknowledge the multiple subjectivities of women as mothers, learners and teachers of their children.

#### Introduction

A significant body of educational research exists on the extent to which complementarity between home and school approaches to learning and literacy leads to successful educational outcomes for children. (Cairney and Ruge, 1995, Freebody, 1996, Gee, 1990, Heath, 1983, Lareau, 1989, Snow, 1987, Street, 1991, Taylor, 1983, Teale, 1978, 1986, Topping, 1985). Educational communities have long been aware of the value of parental involvement in schools, but previously informal partnerships are increasingly becoming institutionalised and assumed in recent policy initiatives. In Victoria, for example, the Victorian Department of Education *Early Years Literacy Program*, released in 1998, enshrined parental participation as a critical factor in the establishment of child literacy. Governments are increasingly foregrounding the importance of parent education as a means of ensuring effective parent-school partnerships. Parent education is a growth industry and amongst the burgeoning range of programs now available, family literacy is a field of practice receiving increasing interest from adult and community educators.

This paper develops a feminist critique of family literacy programs and argues that mothers as gendered subjects have been largely invisible in research into family literacy, subsumed within the neutral terms *family* and *parent*, despite constituting the majority of participants in family literacy programs and undertaking much of the literacy work in families, particularly that concerning the education of their children. I demonstrate that feminist research into the gendered nature of parental participation in the support of child literacy and learning is necessary, in order to avoid both narrowly positioning mothers as handmaidens of schools and the elision of women's desires for their own learning. This paper will argue that critical literacy can serve to reposition mothers in family literacy programs as ethnographers and

critical analysts of family and community literacy practices and thus create a space for the development of the mother as learner and producer of knowledge in her own right.

## **Definitions**

The term 'family literacy' was first used by Denny Taylor (1981) to refer to the rich and diverse uses of literacy within homes and communities and has since been widely adopted to denote a range of meanings. Family literacy draws on multiple academic traditions, among them: adult literacy and English as a Second Language education; child literacy education, in particular the fields of emergent literacy and special education; early childhood development; cognitive psychology and parent education. Family literacy programs are usually collaborative interventions between providers of early childhood education, adult basic education or parenting education. These programs are diverse in terms of their emphases and organization, according to whose literacy development is to be foregrounded: that of parents', children or a direct or indirect combination of parent and child focused literacy (Nickse, 1993). The term intergenerational family literacy (IGFL) is also used (Toomey, 1995), to refer to programs with a dual focus on adult and child literacy. While family literacy programs can be viewed as another strategy for the development of more skilled parental involvement in children's education, the pursuit of such a laudable goal should not obscure the necessity of examining the ideological implications of family literacy programs and the power relationships and gendered responsibilities enshrined within them. In this paper I present a critical literacy approach to the teaching of family literacy in a community setting, to illustrate an alternative pedagogy for family literacy, which provides a space for adults to explore the ideologies of family and literacy in a socially critical way. In order to contextualise my research, I will first provide a brief summary of the major debates in family literacy as an emerging field of practice. I then illustrate how critical literacy can be used in family literacy programs to reposition participants as researchers of language, through close analysis of two texts: literacy anecdotes written by a participant in a family literacy program.

## **Sites of Contestation**

Although there is widespread agreement about the importance of home literacy practices, there is heated debate over appropriate pedagogies and content in family literacy programs. Some critics argue that a theoretical vacuum exists in family literacy in relation to the most effective ways for parents to help their children (Hannon, 1995, 2000, Saracho, 1997). Others critique family literacy programs for their assumption of homogeneous and simplistic notions of both "family" and "literacy" (Bates, Taylor and Tomlin, 1994). Further critiques of family literacy centre on the assumption that low-income families are deficient in both literacy practices, parenting skills and knowledge to effectively support child learning, and hence require regulation and education to ensure that the literacy work of the school is successful (Auerbach, 1989, 1994; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Taylor, 1983; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). These critics question the tendency to attribute poor literacy achievement to deficiencies in the home environment, rather than to school practices (Auerbach, 1994; Cairney, 1995, 2000; Freebody, 1996) and argue that a more complex examination of the relationship between home and school communities is necessary for the development of effective collaborations between parents and teachers.

Since family literacy programs often target and attract women, they have been critiqued for their potential to reinforce existing gendered discourses of literacy work within families (Cairney, 1995; Freebody, 1996; Luttrell, 1996). Broader feminist critiques of literacy education for women center on the danger of failing to acknowledge the knowledge and values of the community for whom a literacy program is designed and caution against unwittingly promoting "literacy for domestication rather than literacy for empowerment"

(Ramdas, 1990). Family literacy programs, when primarily designed to train parents as teacher aides and support and enhance child literacy only, without regard for broader dimensions of adult learning, can be viewed as programs of domestication, in their confinement of participants to a sphere where labour is voluntary, autonomy is minimal and rewards are, for the most part, located in the altruistic domain of good mothering.

### **The Research Context**

The International Year of the Family heralded an injection of funds into the establishment of intergenerational family literacy programs. The multi-campus University I worked in successfully attracted funding for a number of programs and a team of interested teaching staff worked within local community networks to establish individually tailored programs in primary schools, community centres and within church and welfare agencies. In collaboration with a cluster of schools and kindergartens, I established a course, entitled *Multiple Literacies for Parents*, at a community venue adjacent to a kindergarten, which offered a safe outdoor play area for the children, a shed full of bikes, a plentiful supply of toys and kitchen facilities. The classes were scheduled parallel with the kindergarten sessions to minimise the number of children the participants were responsible for during class time, as all had more than one child and 6 students had 4 year olds attending the kindergarten.

The research participants, 11 women and one man (who left the course due to the ill-health of his disabled son), had diverse education and work histories prior to becoming parents. All had between 9 and 11 years of education and had predominantly worked in office administration and textile industries. Three students were from LOTE backgrounds and had previously attended English as a Second Language classes but had not been employed in Australia. Participants were united in their desire to support their children's education more effectively than they felt equipped to do with their current set of understandings about literacy. The course was located within the Certificate in General Education for Adults (Further Study) and the curriculum integrated the three subjects taught, Reading and Writing, Oral Communication and Computing.

My aim in each module was to provide students with a brief summary of the key principles informing the teaching of reading, writing, mathematics and computer literacy in schools, in order to extend their understanding of current educational practices. In addition, I aimed to draw out sets of strategies they could use at home in order to support and understand their children's learning, derived in part from a selection of school based literacy teaching strategies and informed by the concepts of repositioning learners as researchers of language (Comber, 1994) and mothers as ethnographer of family literacy practices (Heath and Thomas, 1984). In her collaborative study with a mother into home reading with a preschool child, Heath presents socio-cultural research into literacy where the mother acts as co-researcher and ethnographer of her family literacy practices. In this study, the mother, who was a 15 year old student in an adult literacy program, identifies an issue of significance for her: the initiation of regular book reading episodes with her pre-school child in a family environment where reading books to children is not an established practice. With assistance from Heath and her adult literacy teacher, in the form of provision of a tape recorder and a supply of books, this woman documents her readings and interactions with her son over several months. She analyses both her child's developing language awareness and her deepening understandings of her own literacy in a series of conversations with Heath. The identification of parent as researcher and ethnographer of family literacy practices acknowledges the situated expertise of parents in relation to their children and foregrounds the unique socio-cultural contexts within which family literacies are enacted as sites for analysis by participants of family literacy programs. I was interested in developing simple

research activities, which could be conducted by participants into their children's developing literacy practices at home, and collaboratively analysed within the program.

### **Learners as Researchers of Language: Literacy Anecdotes**

I collaborated with the women in researching their own literacy socialisation and their family's literacy practices, through a series of investigations into their own reading behaviours and those of their children. I used critical literacy as a framework for the exploration of the cultural construction of gender and in particular the nexus between the experience of motherhood and literacy practices, through a situated teaching of personal writing. I drew on a range of techniques: collective memory work and collective biography, Haug (1987); literacy anecdotes, Brodkey (1992); reading classroom stories for gender; Gilbert, (1993) and Davies (1994); cultural autobiography, Kamler (1999) and language analysis derived from systemic functional linguistics, Kamler (1994, 1995, 1996) and Comber (1996, 1997). The writing tasks undertaken during the course included personal autobiographical writing, fiction writing, child observation notes, report writing, group story writing for children, collaborative story writing with children, journal writing, written analyses and responses to texts of various genres, writing letters to local politicians and preparing minutes for formal meetings.

The concept of using anecdotes as a vehicle for examining the discourses underlying students' understandings of literacy comes from Brodkey (1992:176), who argues the necessity of conceiving literacy as discursive practice. The literacy anecdotes were a way of exploring the mothers' histories and existing literacy practices, a necessary yet often absent component of family literacy programs. They were also a point from which we could begin to examine the discursive constitution of gender and motherhood systematically and collaboratively. I asked the women to write two anecdotes: one an early memory of themselves as readers or writers, and the other a recent literacy event involving themselves and their children. Following Haug (1987), I suggested they write in the third person as a device for distancing themselves from the action, and that they provide fictional names for their children. We made copies of all the anecdotes, read them aloud and analysed the similarities and differences we noticed between the stories. Two anecdotes are reproduced here: Sonya's accounts of a childhood memory of reading and a recent literacy event involving her children. They have been edited to conform to standard English grammar and spelling conventions, but, in content and structure, the texts here are reproduced as the writer wrote them. Through the following analysis, I demonstrate the potential of critical literacy for framing participation in family literacy programs as ethnographic research into family and community literacy practices and into the construction of gendered subjectivities.

#### **Sonya: Anecdote 1**

*She was 7 or 8 years old and now she could read alone. Before this her brother and sister read to her. She lived in 5 storey building where there was a basement library. Almost every day she borrowed a book and was very happy to be reading by herself. The librarian noticed her because she came in every day and began to find books for her. Most she liked, but not all. She had a long friendship with the librarian. She would give her books for her age but she wouldn't let her read sexy books because she said they were unsuitable. She visited the library from the age of 7 till she left school. Reading kept her out of trouble, away from bad company, said her mother. She wanted to be a librarian as a child, and she played library games with children in the building.*

This anecdote situates learning to read within a socio cultural context, arising out of relationships with siblings, librarians and books. Its analysis allowed the group to view the support and encouragement of literacy as something which could be found within a

community, rather than situated solely within the school context, where the teaching of literacy is removed, inaccessible and reserved for experts. Sonya's anecdote evoked recollections of being able to read independently, degrees of access to books and the association between reading and 'good girls'. In this anecdote the practice of reading is encouraged by the mother, who views her daughter's reading habits as protective. The librarian censors her reading material, and shapes the child's career aspirations. Reading is here culturally and morally sanctioned as a gender appropriate pursuit, safe and solitary. Under the watchful gaze of the librarian, reading is a form of regulation, which keeps the girl chaste and under the mother's control. The women felt that reading was an activity that identified a girl as ladylike and intellectual, a practice lauded in their families as a suitable pass-time for a girl, conducted as it often was, silently, inside the home.

The writing and analysis of the literacy anecdotes created a space for the women to produce their own stories and make their everyday literacy practices the object of inquiry. Through the writing and analysis, the women were able to see patterns in the anecdotes and thus functioned as ethnographers in documenting, comparing and questioning what they saw. This work served to resituate them as literacy workers and as mothers, as the second anecdote, which recounts a recent family literacy event, reveals:

### **Sonya's Anecdote 2**

*One day, Christina's mother was washing dishes in the kitchen when her daughter said,*

*"Come here Mum. It's the letter P."*

*Christina's mother came over to look at Christina's writing. She didn't believe her daughter could write because she hadn't taught her. Christina's mother looked at the page. Christina had written a P and she knew the name of it. She wrote a letter C, and said, "That's in my name."*

*Christina's mother thought maybe Christina had learnt the letters from watching Sesame Street and sometimes tracing letters. Christina loves Sesame Street and asks to see it, even on Saturday and Sunday. She said to her mother,*

*"We have to buy a video cassette of Sesame Street."*

*Sometimes Christina's mother sees her daughter tracing letters in colouring books. Maybe this too helps her to learn how to write the letters.*

*Christina's mother is surprised because she couldn't remember being able to write letters when she was Christina's age. She didn't learn to write until she went to school. Christina's mother thinks that if she wasn't so lazy and didn't take so much time looking after the children, that she could teach Christina more about reading and writing, and maybe teach her to read.*

This anecdote served to make visible the home contexts of literacy, located as it is in the domestic realm of the kitchen. The women commented on the importance of the kitchen table as a site for literacy within the family. Striking is the mother's surprise at the daughter's revelation that she is able to both form letters and identify the first letter of her name without being explicitly taught by her mother, who attributes the child's success to repeatedly watching *Sesame Street* and tracing letters in colouring books. Many women shared this belief that *Sesame Street* had taught their children the alphabet. The mother in this text makes no mention of the books she has read to her daughter, the conversations they have shared: the mother's contributions to her daughter's ability to write are invisible in the daily

routine of care she is responsible for. The child's cleverness is fore-grounded and contrasted with the mother's inability to write at the same age. The contemporary range of resources for literacy learning: TV, videos, books is incidental.

The mother's pride at her daughter's achievement is short-lived however, and swiftly transposes into guilt, that she is not doing enough in the literacy education of her clever daughter. She is "lazy" and inefficient in her organisation of the domestic sphere and this inadequacy prevents her from taking on the additional task of teaching her daughter to read. Discourses of the good mother as teacher are present in this text. This mother is clearly aware of her inadequacies as a teacher, but the impossible conflicts between teacher and mother and the multiple ways she shapes her child's learning are invisible to her in this text. She views her "inadequacies" as personal failings, rather than structurally produced by the division of labour within her household, and discursively produced by the patterns of desire she is subject to.

Extensive commentary and critique of each anecdote was undertaken in order to produce reflexive readings such as those summarized here, readings which positioned the writer-learners as excavators and ethnographers of gendered literacy practices. A crucial element of this repositioning was collaborative analysis of the written anecdotes as cultural autobiographies, comparing and contrasting the material, social and historical conditions which shaped them. Participants questioned one another for further information, noted absences in the texts and contributed corresponding and contrasting memories, newly drawn to conscious memory. The women acknowledged the diversity of experience manifested in the stories and also acknowledged that the act of shaping experiences into written anecdotes imposed an order on experience and allowed a scrutiny of the stories behind the story, an exploration of the discourses operating within it.

The process of writing and discussing the literacy anecdotes with the women highlighted further the complex social, historical and cultural forces shaping each individual's concept of literacy. A reading for discourses of gender revealed that literacy work within families was largely carried out by women and yet was both invisible and underrated. In a number of anecdotes, grandmothers featured as nurturers of literacy and were remembered as enthusiastic story readers and regular letter writers. Fathers and grandfathers were however, completely absent from the stories, with the exception of one anecdote in which the father is a shadowy threatening presence.

The knowledge base described here originates with the women's experiences and interpretations of literacy in everyday life, rather than from text-books or literacy experts. The lesson does not rely on the teacher's choice of a particular set of texts, but emanates from the texts produced from this discourse community of mothers, albeit at the request of the teacher/researcher to write within a particular format. I modelled the kinds of questions that could be asked of the texts, and offered possible readings of the anecdotes, and all group members participated in questioning the writer and offering alternative readings and additional personal narratives. For example, in the analysis of Sonya's first anecdote, the group noted with surprise that it was the librarian who encouraged her reading habits. This led to the identification of figures in the lives of participants who directly supported their early literacy and learning: often grandmothers and older siblings were identified, rather than mothers, who were perceived as occupied with other children and domestic work. Thus, the current emphasis on parental involvement in literacy development and in particular the gendered nature of mothers' participation in education and schooling could be understood as historically produced.

A crucial element of this anecdote analysis was the layering of alternate readings of each text. I was particularly struck by the way the women immediately located any self-

deprecation in other people's texts and offered alternate readings highlighting the mother's efforts to do her best in demanding situations. For example, in their analysis of Sonya's second anecdote, the women challenged Sonya's description of the woman in the story as *lazy* for not having the time to teach her daughter to read. All the participants spoke of their daily tension between making the time to 'stimulate' their children by reading stories, playing games with them and taking them to structured developmental activities such as gymnastics and dance classes and keeping up with routine domestic tasks. They spoke of feeling pressured to adequately prepare their preschool children for the literacy demands of school, and of the need to compensate for large classes and busy teachers through time spent at home in explicit teaching of reading. The women assumed responsibility for both the management of their children's education and the domestic management and this was experienced as a heavy burden that was rarely shared with their husbands. The women were extremely supportive of one another and generously offered their own innovative time management strategies. These conversations were characterised by much laughter at the absurdity of the situations that mothers sometimes find themselves in. Through humorous discussion of these texts, perceived personal inadequacies, such as *laziness*, could be viewed as cultural manifestations of patriarchal and sexist ideologies of motherhood, rather than personal failure. Through the conversations around these anecdotes, a space was created for the women to reconceptualise themselves as mothers, as literacy workers within their families and as ethnographers of literacy as lived.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has revealed only a small part of the research data of this study. I have demonstrated one element of a pedagogy for family literacy programs grounded in critical literacy and feminism. I wish to conclude by suggesting that a number of revisions to dominant theory and practice in family literacy provision are required, in order to create an approach that takes greater cognisance of the needs of parent learners. An alternative pedagogy for family literacy firstly challenges unitary conceptions of literacy and proposes a socio-culturally located pedagogy of multiple, critical literacies. An awareness of the ideological work of literacy education is critical in the development of family literacy programs. Secondly, an alternative pedagogy for family literacy foregrounds gender and subjectivity explicitly, as critical elements of the curriculum. A feminist pedagogy created multiple discursive positions from which to analyse motherhood and literacy and served to reconceptualise motherhood and its associated literacy work, through an acknowledgment of the women's multiple subjectivities. In their location as ethnographers of local, lived literacies, the women were repositioned as active, informed and critical analysts of the literacy practices in their world.

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